

Review of: *In the Legions of Napoleon* by Heinrich von Brandt

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Brandt, Heinrich von. *In the Legions of Napoleon: The Memoirs of a Polish Officer in Spain and Russia, 1808-1813*. Translated and edited by Jonathan North. Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole, 1999. 304 pages, maps, illus. ISBN# 1853673803. \$34.95. Hardcover.

The Emperor's armies were anything but a French force alone sweeping across the continent. Men from Italy, Switzerland, the German States, and so on joined the French as their states were enveloped by the Napoleonic Empire. For Heinrich von Brandt (1789-1868), a young, well educated Polish officer in the Prussian army¹, joining Napoleon's army after the Treaty of Tilsit offered an even greater chance for him to distinguish himself in the newly formed Vistula Legion. Brandt's memoirs give testimony to the dedication and sacrifices that non-French soldiers endured for the sake of not only Imperial ambitions, but more importantly their fellow countrymen who believed Napoleon would liberate their homelands by changing the political structure of Europe forever. Translator and editor Jonathan North also includes "Biographies of Leading Personalities"² which help the reader learn about French, Spanish, British, and Russians who were important to the campaigns and it also includes descriptions of the high ranking Polish officers who became not only important to the Polish men they commanded, but important to the whole Imperial cause.

Brandt is writing these memoirs around fifty years after the events of the Spanish and Russian campaigns, but one still gets the sense that he can still smell and taste the gunpowder and blood in the air when he describes events like this one: "I was bowled over and covered in earth by a roundshot ricocheting right by me. At the same time my right hand was hit by buckshot which went into the flesh so deeply that it has since been impossible to remove it. Indeed, it still gives me trouble to this day, reminding me of that first day of the siege of Tortosa."³ Where Brandt does make mistakes, North does well to add a footnote to correct him. Most of these instances are not mistakes in Brandt's memory, but in his research and do little to diminish his story. Brandt would be injured also in the head in Spain, and also in the ankle during the Russian campaign, but the tone of his memoirs reveal that he always considers himself to be one of the lucky ones, as between August 1, 1808 and April 15, 1813, the Vistula Legion would be reduced from just under 4,000 strong to a meager 516 men.⁴ The Poles in particular were used in Spain mostly as garrison troops, but given the nature of the Spanish occupation, this legion came into contact with the Spanish guerillas quite often, and Brandt's account is proof of this. Forced to billet in the homes of sometimes hostile Spanish families, these troops had to keep one eye open at all times. For instance there is a love story within his memoirs that describes how he would sneak into a young girl named Ines's room when her uncle would leave. Brandt says that Ines told him "my blood freezes when I think about him [her uncle Manuel]. He is hand in hand with your enemies and he wants to massacre the lot of you!"⁵ Despite these innocent excursions among hostile civilians, Brandt seems to portray himself and the men under him (he had the rank of lieutenant in a company of voltigeurs in Spain) as being of exceptional discipline and not partaking in the atrocities that he and others allude to during the Spanish section of his memoirs. In fact, though out the book, Brandt never paints himself in a

¹ Brandt, 29.

² Ibid., 29-34.

³ 123.

⁴ Appendix B, 269.

⁵ 95.

bad light or admits to mistake. When he does fall into trouble with his superiors he always offers justification for his actions, like in the case of his exchange with a certain Major M- over the state of their equipment for which Brandt was put under arrest for a short time. Brandt explains that the major was working with the equipment and clothing contractors in providing the troops with less than quality goods, therefore when the major accused Brandt of negligence, Brandt explains: "I therefore felt justified in replying that nothing could be done with such shoddy goods and it was no surprise that the shoes wore out overnight."⁶ Episodes like this one always place Brandt in a good light, which can be expected from a man who retired at the rank of Major General in the Prussian army at the time of writing. Brandt was either very selective about what he wrote about or was truly an exceptional figure in this period.

The Russian campaign is described as the chance the Polish troops had been waiting for. North points out in a footnote that Napoleon had no intention of restoring Poland,⁷ but the troops were allowed to believe it anyway. For Brandt, the Russian campaign started on a high note as he was recommended for promotion by the Emperor himself in the Place du Carrousel⁸ and an eventual transfer to the Imperial Guard where he would personally come across Marshalls Devout, Berthier, Murat, and of course Napoleon more often. As with the fortunes of The Grande Armée, Brandt's experience takes a disastrous turn after the capture of Moscow. Injured in the ankle east of Moscow, the story turns from a search for glory to a desperate race for survival. Brandt, along with the other injured are left to make their way back ahead of the retreat or risk being left behind to the enemy. Brandt, with sores under his arms from his crutches is forced to trade and steal food and pieces of cloth in order to make it back to Vilna (in present day Lithuania) where the masses of injured soldiers thought they could recover. Brandt describes men "literally freezing in their tracks"⁹ and piling corpses to build barriers against the fierce winter winds.¹⁰ Amidst the suffering and death, Brandt mentions that at the height of this disparaging death march, a "sealed carriage" passed them quickly, a carriage he later was told held the Emperor as he raced back to Paris.¹¹ These portions of his memoirs that deal with the retreat from Russia are the most telling of Brandt's character. Unlike the rather embellished accounts of the Spanish and early Russian campaigns, the account of the retreat through Russia has few places for bravery, with the exception of the crossing of the Beresina,¹² it is rather a mad dash for individual existence where men become beasts, further illustrating the shared outcome French and foreign troops experienced in the Grand Armée.

Despite being written so long after the events which it is about, *In the Legions of Napoleon* is a very complete narrative written from the memory and notes of a very talented army officer, as can be assumed by his rise to Maj. General. The fact that he rejoined the

⁶ 119.

⁷ 185.

⁸ 183. He actually received his promotion to captain later when Napoleon saw Brandt in a review of the Guard in Archbishop's Square in Smolensk. Brandt says that "Napoleon stopped in front of me and, as was his habit, drew me towards him by a button on my uniform. He said, 'This officer should have been made a captain in Paris, make him a captain now.'" 212.

⁹ 256.

¹⁰ 254.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Brandt praises the work of the engineers (many of whom died in the icy waters) who built two bridges north of the bridge at Borisov. Brandt believed this saved the Army from total destruction. 248.

Prussian army after serving under Napoleon further illustrates the nature of warfare in Europe for this period. Some of the men in Napoleon's army would reach similar ranks in other armies across Europe, even in Russia.¹³ The Napoleonic Wars were a truly international affair, and Brandt's memoirs clearly show that despite not being French, young men fought and died bravely for a number of reasons under one flag.

¹³ General Josef Chlopicki (1771-1854), a Pole, is one example of this. 30.